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A Study Of The Poetry Of James Weldon Johnson

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A STUDY OF THE POETRY OF JAMES WELDON JOHNSON

BY

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Introduction

This thesis aims at an evaluation of the poetry of James Weldon Johnson, in an attempt to find his place in American letters. Naturally, in attempting to ascertain the magnitude of Johnson's poetic contribution, the author of this study has endeavored to respect established principles of literary criticism.

At the outset, it is deemed propitious to define several terms in order that a clear, logical understanding might be effected. While the term poetry is difficult to define, the following interpretation of poetry is sufficient for the purpose of this study:

> Poetry is classified as one of the fine arts, along with painting, sculpture, architecture, music, drama and dancing. From the inclusive standpoint of the cultural history of the human race, it may be defined: Poetry is verse which produces a deep emotional response. This calls for a definition of verse, of which poetry constitutes a subclass: Verse is words arranged according to some conventionalized repetition. [1]

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1 Wood, Clement, Poets' Handbook , New York , Greenberg Publisher, Inc., 1940, p. 3.

In pursuit of an acceptable definition of criticism, the author of this thesis has selected the following as one which "strikes the nail on the head":

> Criticism is essentially an expression of taste, or that faculty of imaginative sympathy by which the reader or spectator is able to relive the vision created by the artist. 2

Therefore, in the preparation of this thesis, the writer has attempted to analyze critically the poetry of James Weldon Johnson in an effort to discover the ideas which he expressed in his poetry and his manner or method of expressing them.

While it is not the aim or intention of the writer to construct a biography, the historical and social factors cited have been interpolated with a view at arriving at a fuller appreciation and a more comprehensive understanding of Johnson's status as a poet.

The material which serves as a basis for this study has been gleaned from a variety of

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2 Spingarn, J.E. , "Criticism in the United States", Criticism in America, Its Function and Status , New York, Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1924, p. 291.

sources, primary and secondary. All of the published works of James Weldon Johnson have been freely examined. In addition, books , magazines and newspapers containing articles by, or about, Johnson have been scrutinized.

The reason for "unearthing" the background of the poet is obvious; nevertheless, a slight degree of explanation will not be amiss:

> To understand a poet aright it is necessary then to have some sympathetic and imaginative knowledge of his times; not the accurate knowledge of an historian, but a responsive imagination that can call up , in part at least, a picture of the past and its motives for living. 3

Few Americans, irrespective of their time, age or environment, have led a fuller , more fruitful existence than James Weldon Johnson . Indeed, the biography of James Weldon Johnson is a study in versatility. One who is familiar with Johnson's background is amazed at the general level of excellence attained by him in the diversified activities which commanded his attention.

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3 Buck, Philo M., The Golden Thread , New York, The Macmillan Co., 1931, p. 3.

Evidently, he caught the spirit of Booker T. Washington's immortal lines: "I will strive each day of my life to reach the highest mark of pure, unselfish useful living."

James Weldon Johnson has indeed led a timely, colorful and varied existence ..

> ... as a teacher, as a writer for the stage, in the diplomatic service, and as secretary of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. He has produced numerous books in both verse and prose, some of the more notable being Fifty Years , And Other Poems , God's Trombones: Seven Negro Sermons in Verse, The Book of American Negro Poetry (edited), Black Manhattan, and an autobiography , Along This Way; and the race is especially indebted to him for the lyric, "Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing", now widely known as the Negro National Anthem. 4

James Weldon Johnson was not a poetic genius whose inspiration and capacity for expression , like that of Burns, developed without training in literature. Johnson, above all else, must not be considered as a poet who arose from the lower tiers of society or the depths of obscurity. Johnson was born with opportunities not enjoyed by

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4 Brawley, Benjamin, Negro Builders and Heroes , Chapel Hill, The University of North Carolina Press. 1937, p. 237.

many of his contemporaries, white and black.

He was born on June 17, 1871 in Jacksonville, Florida. It is commonly thought that he was born in the South and reared in the North. Careful investigation, however, will displace this opinion which is erroneous. He was also reared in the South, the place of his nativity. [5]

In 1887 he finished at Stanton Elementary School and was immediately enrolled at Atlanta University as a junior in the preparatory department.

It was in 1888 that he received his first experience as a teacher in the backwoods of Georgia. It is entirely probable that Johnson's first hand knowledge of these backwoods' settlers inspired such poems of his as "Tunk", which is one of his earliest efforts in dialect. Later on, Johnson was to discard dialect as a vehicle of expression, because he felt it narrowed the poet's range too closely. [6]

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5 Kerlin, Robert T., Negro Poets and Their Poems, Washington, D.C., Associated Publishers, Inc., 1935, p. 90.

6 Johnson, James Weldon, ed., The Book of American Negro Poetry, New York, Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1931, p. 4.

The year 1894 marks his graduation from Atlanta University. This event occurred in the spring. That same year, in the fall, he became principal of the Stanton School.

Three years later, in 1897, he had the unique honor and distinction of being the first Negro admitted to the Florida bar. It is entirely probable that Johnson's legal training aided him in reaching logical conclusions and clear-cut definitions. For example, in one of his shorter poems, "We to America" , which serves to illustrate a dispassionate attitude which is as typical of sincere lawyers as it is of genuine poets, he sums up the inter-racial situation thusly:

> How would you have us, as we are --
> Or sinking 'neath the load we bear?
> Our eyes fixed forward on a star --
> Or gazing empty at despair?
>
> Rising or falling? Men or things?
> With dragging pace or footsteps fleet?
> Strong, willing sinews in your wings?
> Or tightening chains about your feet?

In 1899 he and his brother, Rosamond, spent the summer in New York writing for the musical comedy stage. In 1900, James Weldon Johnson wrote the words to "Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing", the national Negro anthem. The music was supplied by

Rosamond Johnson.

This (song) was originally composed for a group of school children preparing for a Lincoln's birthday exercise,but its noble words and swelling music made it deservedly popular, and it is now regularly sung in Negro schools and colleges throughout the country. 7

The Johnson Brothers and Bob Cole began publishing lyrics for musical comedies under the name; Cole and Johnson Brothers in 1901.

Between 1903 - 1906, he studied with Brander Matthews at Columbia University. In 1904 he had been awarded the Master of Arts degree by Atlanta University.

Johnson's consular service began in 1906, when he was appointed United States Consul to Puerto Cabello, Venezuela. Because of his wide knowledge of the Latin tongues and customs, he was later appointed as United States Consul to Corinto, Nicaragua, a position he occupied from 1909 - 1912.

The year 1910 is particularly notable in Johnson's personal life; for in this year, he married Grace Nail of New York City.

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7 Brawley, Benjamin, The Negro Genius , New York, Dodd, Mead and Co., 1939, p. 207.

The outbreak of World War I , 1914, found Johnson as the editor of the New York Age . For a period of approximately ten years, he published editorials through its columns under the caption Views and Reviews .

In 1916 he was appointed Field Secretary of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. By this time, he had become a nationally respected "champion" of the rights of his people. In a nation-wide editorial contest, he was awarded a prize by the Philadelphia Public Ledger .

Talledega University honored him in 1917 with the honorary degree, Doctor of Literature.

Continuing a career which exemplifies his insatiable interest in public life, in 1920 he was sent by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People to investigate the American misrule of the Black Republic of Haiti.

Howard University honored his achievements in 1923 by awarding him an honorary degree, Doctor of Literature.

In 1924, he was appointed as a member of the Trustee Board of Atlanta University.

In recognition of his variegated accomplishments, James Weldon Johnson received the Spingarn Medal as "author, diplomat, and public servant".

The year 1927 was expressly memorable , for he received the distinguished Harmon Award for God's Trombones . By this time, Johnson's achievements in literature had become a"favorite topic" for critics from coast to coast.

One authority made the following remarks regarding God's Trombones :

> In his sermons, Mr. Johnson has eschewed the usual Negro dialect ... There is sensitivity, artistic judgement , and a sustained emotional beauty in his work. If the old Negro preachers discoursed and chanted in this fashion, they were poets indeed. 8

This same year another critic gives the following recognition of his efforts to replace the traditional dialect by poems in literary English:

> ...it is something of an achievement to suggest, as he does, the spirit and rhythm, of those sermons, and to do it without the help of dialect or of antiphonal repetitions. There may be two opinions about the tradition of

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8 New York Times Book Review , June 19, 1927 p. 11.

> dialect; at least, Mr. Johnson makes a very good argument against it in his preface, and gets on very well without it. 9

Climaxing a colorful career as a public servant, in 1929 he attended the third biennial conference of the Institute of Pacific Relations, which met in Kyoto, Japan.

In 1930, he spent the year in New York at "Five Acres" writing under a Rosenwald Fellowship.

His services at Fisk University were begun in 1931, when he became professor of the Adam K.Spence chair of Creative Literature.

He had not yet stopped annexing national laurels; in 1933, he was awarded the W. E. B. Dubois prize of $1000 for Black Manhattan as the outstanding piece of non-fiction by a Negro author during the period 1930 - 1932.

It was in 1934 that James Weldon Johnson was singularly honored by the faculty of New York University with his appointment as Visiting Professor of Creative Literature.

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9 Monroe, Harriet, "Appreciation of James Weldon Johnson", Poetry , 1927, 30: 291.

In 1937, his volume of selected poems entitled St. Peter Relates An Incident was included in the 200 books given to the White House Library by the National Book Fair.

In 1938, the last year of his life, he published his own "code of race-relations", Negro Americans, What Now?. The concluding paragraphs from this "direct from the shoulder" volume are particularly effective, in so far as the political and personal philosophy of the author are revealed.

> The pledge to myself which I have endeavored to keep through the greater part of my life is: I will not allow one prejudiced person or one million or one hundred million to blight my life. I will not let prejudice or any of its attendant humiliations and injustices bear me down to spiritual defeat. My inner life is mine, and I shall defend and maintain its integrity against all the powers of hell. 10

James Weldon Johnson's colorful, rich and resourceful career of public and private life came to an abrupt end in 1938. Critics throughout

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10 Johnson, James Weldon, Negro Americans, What Now?, New York, The Viking press, 1938, p. 103.

the nation paused in their routine affairs to pay their final respects to this outstanding American.

Time in its issue of July 4, 1938 makes this comment in its celebrated column "Milestones" --

> James Weldon Johnson,67, famed Negro educator, author (Autobiography of An Ex-Colored Man), champion of Negro rights; (died) of injuries sustained when his automobile struck a train,in Wiscasset, Me. Secretary of the N. A. A. C. P. (1916 - 30), he was also the first Negro to hold a consular post (Puerto Cabello, Venezuela); only Negro in the United States ever to command a naval detachment (Nicaragua, 1912); first Negro baseball pitcher to throw a curve.

Time, however, was by no means the only national publication to formally acknowledge the demise of James Weldon Johnson. Johnson , like Sidney Lanier, had been a musician-poet; therefore, it is not surprising to find a celebrated music periodical remarking of his accomplishments.11 Another publication adds these pointed statements:

> Few leaders of any race have

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11 Etude , Oct., 1938 p. 622.

> made so distinctive a contribution to their people as James Weldon Johnson, whose death in late June brought a sense of shock and sorrow that reached far beyond his wide circle of friends and associates. [12]

Therefore, in completing this "passing survey" of James Weldon Johnson's life, the writer of this thesis is now ready to launch into a discussion of Johnson's poems in dialect, which will be followed by chapters on Johnson's poems in literary English. This thesis will reach its culmination in the last chapter, at which time the poet's work will be finally appraised.

In reviewing the summary influences which helped mould his personality and shape his poetic career, one can honestly believe that Johnson's "Prayer at Sunrise" was somehow, somewhere answered. This lyrical exhortation concludes:

> O greater Maker of this Thy great sun,
> Give me the strength this one day's race to run;
> Fill me with light, fill me with sun-like strength;
> Fill me with joy to rob the day its length.

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12 The Survey, July, 1938, p. 239.

Light from within, light that will
outward shine,
Strength to make strong some weaker
heart than mine,
Joy to make glad each soul that
feels its touch;
Great Father of the sun, I ask this
much.

James Weldon Johnson's Poems in Dialect

Before embarking upon a detailed discussion of the dialect poetry of James Weldon Johnson, it is appropriate to consider the main trends and themes which typified the work of Negro poets prior to Johnson's genesis.

At the same time, a few critical comments relative to the meaning of dialect and the nature of poetry are in order:

> Dialect is a form of speech peculiar to a district, class or person; a subordinate variety of language with distinguishable vocabulary. 13

In considering a poem, it is of vital neces - sity to understand the motives, or moods, which precipitated its composition. For,

> ... every poem has a unique motive of its own, working itself out into the general shape of the poem and into all details of technique; an individual life organizing round itself its necessary and peculiar embodiment. 14

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13 Fowler, H.W., and Fowler, F.G., The Concise Oxford Dictionary (adapted from The Oxford Dictionary), Oxford, The Clarendon Press, 1925, p.227.

14 Abercrombie, Lascelles, The Theory of Poetry, New York, Harcourt, Brace, and Co., 1926, p. 35.

Therefore, to understand Johnson's development as a poet we must look at his background for a moment to detect any possible motives which might have inspired his earliest efforts in dialect.

Prior to Johnson's advent as a poet, the dual role that had been portrayed by the Negro in American literature had been either to supply pathos or humor.

Most of the initial efforts of the Negro poets were inclined in one of two general directions. The first group used dialect, which later proved to have definite limitations; the second group expended its energies in "imitative poetry".

> As late as 1900 Paul Laurence Dunbar was known wholly as the author of sentimental poems in broken English. His non-dialectical pieces like the "Ode to Ethiopia" and his excellent sonnets were quite disregarded. 15

Close examination reveals that the poems of these predecessors of James Weldon Johnson compared very favorably with those of their contemporaries.

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15 Blankenship, Russell, American Literature, New York, Henry Holt and Co., 1931, p. 640.

Dunbar's contribution, in particular, is important because the race-consciousness which inspired his poetry in dialect, at least, served as an impetus and incentive for other Negro poets to express their dormant talents.

It is well to remember, however, that this early dialect poetry reflected primarily the "plantation scene" and the illiterate type of Negro.

> Today all this is changed. .. The old humorous and sentimental aspects of Negro literature have disappeared before the critical approach of those men who seek the soul of their race beneath external characteristics that always suspiciously resemble stage make-ups. 16

Dunbar's successors, in the main, revolted against the use of a stereotyped dialect. They sought to interpret the spiritual in contrast to the purely superficial side of Negro life.

It is necessary here to make a clear-cut distinction. Much of the poetry of the New Negro is veiled or open propaganda; on the other hand, many Negro poets have attempted a fine, aesthetic piece

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16 Blankenship, Ibid., p. 640.

of work -- the interpretation of the nobler im - pulses and more humane endeavors of a race, which is justly contributing (and has already contri - buted) its share to the literary and spiritual heritage, which is America's.

With this brief "overview" of some of the main currents, which colored the poetry of Negro Americans prior to Johnson, a discussion of his poems in dialect can now be ventured.

Most of Johnson's earlier poetry follows in the traditional pattern pursued by Dunbar and his contemporaries. A typical dialect poem of James Weldon Johnson's is the one which follows : " A Banjo Song "

W'en de banjos wuz a-ringin',
'N'evehbody wuz a-singin',
Oh, wuzen dem de good times sho!
All de ole folks would be
chattin',
An de pickaninnies pattin',
As dey heah'd de feet a-shufflin'
'cross de flo'.

An' how we'd dance, an' how we'd
sing!
Dance tel de day done break.
An' how dem banjos dey would ring,
An' de cabin flo' would shake!

Come along, come along,
Come along, come along,
Don't you heah dem banjos a-ringin'?

Gib a song, gib a song,
Gib a song, gib a song,
Git yo' feet fixed up fu' a-wingin'.

W'ile de banjos dey do plunka-plunka-plunk,
We'll dance tel de ole flo' shake;
W'ile de feet keep a-goin' chooka-chooka - chook.
We'll dance tel de day done break.

Needless to aver, this poem is far below the best efforts of Johnson. At best, the above poem can be considered as sentimental "jargon". The same author upon reaching poetic maturity was to give the world such dignified and picturesque lines as those which follow from "Go Down Death" .

And God sat back on his throne,
And he commanded that tall, bright angel standing at his right hand:
Call me Death!'
And that tall, bright angel cried in a voice
That broke like a clap of thunder:
Call Death! - - Call Death!
And the echo sounded down the streets of heaven
Till it reached away back to that shadowy place,
Where Death waits with his pale, white horses.

Another dialect poem of Johnson's serves to illustrate the extent to which his initial poetic efforts were influenced by the traditional themes of Negro poetry. In "Brer Rabbit, You's de Cutes' of 'Em All", the concluding lines pour forth the lesson or moral which inevitably terminated most

of these dialect poems. A certain primitive air, lightness of theme, and lack of emotional depth are apparent:

> Brer Wolf am mighty cunnin',
> Brer Fox am mighty sly,
> Brer Terrapin an' Possum - kinder small;
> Brer Lion's mighty vicious,
> Brer B'ar he's sorter 'spicious,
> Brer Rabbit, you's de cutes' of 'em all.

Here, the theme, rhyme and rhythm are all elementary.

Two other poems in dialect will serve to illustrate the narrow limits to which dialect confined the poet's powers of expression.

The first dialect poem,to be subsequently reviewed, has a plaintive, melancholy note -- it reflects the forlorn, heart-weary Negro. It is unnecessary to add that its sentimentality approaches a melodramatic pitch. Yet,the poet who composed it was to be the primary "spear-head" in a rebellion against the smooth-worn stereotypes of dialect.

"Sence You Went Away" is presented as an example of pathos in dialect:

> Seems lak to me de stars don't
> shine so bright,
> Seems lak to me de sun done loss
> his light,
> Seems lak to me der's nothin'
> goin right,
> Sence you went away.

Seems lak to me de sky ain't haf
so blue,
Seems lak to me dat ev'ything
wants you,
Seems lak to me I don't know what
to do,
Sence you went away.

Seems lak to me dat ev'ything is
wrong,
Seems lak to me de day's jes twice
ez long,
Seems lak to me de bird's forgot
his song,
Sence you went away.

Seems lak to me I jest can't hep but
sigh,
Seems lak to me ma th'oat keeps
gittin' dry,
Seems lak to me a tear stays in ma
eye,
Sence you want away.

Now, in an entirely different vein, in so far as sentimentality is concerned, is Johnson's humorous poem: "Answer to Prayer".Here the "comical, carefree, fun-loving, juvenile attitude" of the plantation Negro comes into ascent.

Der ain't no use in sayin' de Lawd
won't answer prah;
If you knows how to ax Him,
I knows He's bound to heah.

De trouble is, some people don't
ax de proper way,
Den w'en dey git's no answer dey
doubts de use to pray.

You got to use egzac'ly de 'spressions
an' de words
To show dat 'tween yo' faith an' works,
you 'pends on works two-thirds.

Now, one time I remember -- jes how
long I won't say --
I thought I'd like a turkey to eat
on Chris'mus day.

Fu' weeks I dreamed 'bout turkeys,
a-strutt'n in der pride;
But seed no way to git one --
widout de Lawd pervide.

An' so I went to prayin', I pray'd
wid all my might:
"Lawd, sen' to me a turkey." I
pray'd bofe day an' night.

"Lawd sen' to me a turkey, a big one
if you please."
I 'clar to heaben I pray'd so much I
mos' wore out ma knees.

I pray'd dat prah so often, I pray'd
dat prah so long,
Yet didn't git no turkey, I knowed
'twas sump'n wrong.

So on de night 'fore Chris'mus w'en I
got down to pray,
"Lawd sen' me to a turkey," I had de
sense to say.

"Lawd sen' me to a turkey." I know dat
prah was right,
An' it was sholy answer'd; I got de
bird dat night.

In this particular poem, the differences in grammatical construction of this prayer caused it to be first denied, then granted. The prayer was answered when the penitent asked the Lord to send him "to" a turkey.

Even if this is not an accurate presentation of the deeper spiritual side of the Negro,

which is revealed in Johnson's later poems, one can readily admire the cleverness of the author who in later years was to give America such satiric poems as "St. Peter Relates An Incident".

Other well-known dialect poems by James Weldon Johnson, to mention a few of the most publicized ones, are: "Negro Love Song", "A Plantation Bacchanal", "Tunk" , and "The Rivals" .

In justice to Johnson , it might be well to point out at this stage of the thesis, that he was not only a poet, but also a critic of no mean ability.

No finer or more pointed criticism of dialect as a medium of expression can be found than the one from Johnson's pen:

> Both the poets and their readers now realize that as an instrument the old dialect has but two main stops, humor and pathos. The poets, at any rate understand that this restricted gamut is too narrow for the interpretation or even the presentation of present-day Negro life. [17]

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17 Johnson, James Weldon. Saint Peter Relates An Incident, Selected Poems , New York, The Viking Press, 1935, p. 69.

In a still later section of the same analysis of the deficiencies of dialect as a poetic medium, he adds:

> ... the Negro poet in the United States finds that for achieving the most comprehensive expression his medium must be American speech. [18]

Not wishing to be referred to as an "out-and-out" repudiator of all dialect, he makes this concession, which is, in the strict sense of the word, more of an acknowledgement than an apology.

> ... much has been done in the traditional dialect with more tenderness and charm, with a gentler humor, a keener poignancy, and a wider appeal than, probably would have been possible through any other medium. To take Dunbar's dialect poetry out of American literature would cause both a racial and a national loss. [19]

James Weldon Johnson's revolt against dialect is typical of the attitude of the newer Negro poets, who have sought more universal themes and modes of expression. Chief repre-

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18 Ibid., p. 70.
19 Idem.

sentatives of this nes group are Countee Cullen, Claude McKay and William Stanley Braithwaite, one of America's foremost critics. Langston Hughes has also displayed exceptional promise as a poet.

> In general the New Negro writers are divided into two groups, the realists and the symbolists ... The realists .. are interested in objective description of Negro life, with all the details of costume, dialect, superstitions and traditional customs. The symbolists , who might better be called the spiritual realists, are concerned with the deep racial traits of the Negro, with his temperament and moods that might pass for a philosophy in a more sophisticated race, and with his distinctive idioms turned into good English. 20

It is not difficult for the researcher to discover in the poetry of James Weldon Johnson varying moods and techniques. Johnson's versatility enabled him to encompass in his poetry a wide latitude of subject matter and a diversity of style which ranges from poems in the traditional dialectical patterns to those in sophisticated vers libre .

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20 Blankenship, Op. cit. , p. 640.

To conclude this discussion, which was generally focused on the subject of dialect, particularly Johnson's dialect poems, it might be well to point out that other Negro poets have publicly voiced their protests against a blind adherence to the use of dialect. One of the main exponents of this new school of poetic thought is Countee Cullen, who in the excellent Foreword to his anthology , Caroling Dusk, makes this prophetic statement:

> If dialect is missed in this collection , it is enough to state that the day of dialect as far as Negro poets are concerned is in the decline. Added to the fact that these poets are out of contact with this fast-dying medium, certain sociological considerations and the natural limitations of dialect for poetic expression militate against its use even as a tour de force. In a day when artificiality is so vigorously condemned, the Negro poet would be foolish indeed to turn to dialect.

In summary, it can be said that the early poetry of James Weldon Johnson was mainly dialectical in form; he refers to it in his book, Fifty Years and Other Poems , under the caption,"Jingles and Croons" . It can, also, be stated without fear of contradiction that as Johnson matured as a poet,

he naturally sought a more universal medium with which to express his thoughts. It was quite logical for him to forsake and desert the out-moded dialectical patterns.

It was with God's Trombones that Johnson became an "experimentalist". It is in these seven sermons, and in his poems written in a lyrical style and in free verse from which one can gain a final estimate of his merit as a poet. In God's Trombones, Johnson elevates the traditional folk sermons of his people into a dignified and refined tradition. In his poems in literary English , his true depth as a poet was to be revealed. In this medium, he was destined to release a type of poetry celebrated for its brilliance of substance and form. If he did not attain a true pinnacle of magnificence, at least, the judicious critic must agree that he caught some of the spirit of this "aesthetic principle" which underlies poetry:

> Greatness in poetry is greatness both of substance and form. The great poet expresses experience which is sufficiently universal to have meaning beyond his environment and his years. Great poetry is capable of reinterpretation with the passing of time; it

> has something to say to men
> long years after it is written. 21

The poetic talent which had been "bridled and chained" in the period of Johnson's early dialect poetry was to become unleashed in such majestic lines as these from God's Trombones ("The Creation"):

> And as far as the eye of God could see
> Darkness covered everything,
> Blacker than a hundred midnights
> Down in a cypress swamp.

Here, in truth, was a theme coupled together with lines of moving passion, yet such emotional restraint on the part of the poet to raise a common-place tradition to the levels of an American folk classic.

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21 Boas, Ralph Philip, The Study and Appreciation of Literature , New York, Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1931, p. 94.

James Weldon Johnson's
Poems in Literary English

While no sober-minded critic will deny the fact that a definite distinction must be made between poetry and propaganda, even the casual reader must admit that quite frequently there is a thin line of demarcation which separates the one from the other.

Poetry is essentially an artistic effort, while propaganda is a deliberate, conscious effort to convert the reader to one's own convictions. Other more capable and recognized authorities have already made acceptable definitions of the nature of each:

> .. the two fundamentals of poetry, intensity of experience and rhythmical expression, are common to all peoples in all ages, and these fundamentals, made articulate in some kind of structural pattern, are found wherever oral or written records have preserved the oldest traditions of races. 22

On the other hand, the poem infiltrated with propaganda resembles the "problem novel", in that

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22 Boas, Op. cit., p. 21.

> ... they present a brief for or against one class of people, one type of living, one activity of civilization.
> 23

James Weldon Johnson's poems in literary English present a wide range of subject matter. There are those poems of his which contain a sheer burst of lyricism like "The Glory of the Day Was in Her Face". This poem is a twelve line lyric, which reveals definite traits of the influence of the Romanticists. It consists of three quartrains ; it is not necessary to elaborate on the technique or the theme -- both are traditional; again, the preceding term is used in a relative sense.

> The glory of the day was in her face,
> The beauty of the night was in her eyes.
> And over all her loveliness, the grace
> Of Morning blushing in the early skies.
>
> And in her voice, the calling of the dove;
> Like music of a sweet, melodious part.
> And in her smile, the breaking light of love;
> And all the gentle virtues in her heart.

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23 Thrall, William Flint, and Hibbard, Addison , A Handbook to Literature , New York, The Odyssey Press, 1936, pp. 339 - 340.

And now the glorious day, the
beauteous night,
The birds that signal to their
mates at dawn
To my dull ears, to my tear -
blinded sight,
Are one with the dead, since
she is gone.

In this poem the lyric expresses " sorrow " at the departure of a loved one. This brings us to another type of poem, which Johnson used quite frequently, a poem which is designed to glorify or commemorate the achievements of his race.

Since Johnson was an astute scholar, as well as a poet, it is not difficult to understand the extent to which he was motivated to interpret and publicize the nobler accomplishments of his race. Usually, Johnson's poetry of this type is written in a subdued, restrained mood. It is interesting to compare Johnson's " O Black and Unknown Bards " with two poems written by his contemporaries.

Johnson in musing on the " untaught, unknown, and unnamed creators of the spirituals"says:

You sang not deeds of heroes or
of kings;
No chant of bloody war, no exult-
ing paean
Of arms-won triumphs; but your
humble strings
You touched in chord with music
empyrean.

You sang far better than you knew;
the songs
That for your listener's hearts
sufficed
Still live -- but more than this
to you belongs:
You sang a race from wood and
stone to Christ.

(At this point, it is considered essential to emphasize the fact that these comparisons are presented solely for the purpose of expediting this study; it is not intended that one poet's "superiority" should be propagandized at the risk of damaging the other poet's prestige.)

Two other Negro poets, McKay and Cullen , in particular, have shifted their emphasis to a greater degree from the dim realms of the past to the stages of the present; instead of meditating upon the contributions of their forebears , McKay and Cullen have introduced new "slants".

Claude McKay in language, which is decidedly masculine, writes in this fashion of the Negro's place in contemporary society in "America" --

Although she feeds me bread of
bitterness,
And sinks into my throat her
tiger's tooth,
Stealing my breath of life, I
will confess
I love this cultured hell that
test my youth!

Again shifting his attention from past accomplishments and present differentials to a more cosmopolitan vein, Cullen writes in his fine poem, "Protest" --

> I long not now, a little while at least,
> For that serene interminable hour
> When I shall leave this barmaceidal feast,
> With poppy for my everlasting flower.
> I long not now for that dim cubicle
> Of earth to which my lease will not expire,
> Where he who comes a tenant there may dwell
> Without a thought of famine, fire or flood.

In the above poem, the diction is particularly praiseworthy. Cullen is, undoubtedly, one of the finest of America's contemporary poets. To return to the comparison, -- in the first poem the poet's contemplation converges towards the past; in the second poem, the attention of the poet is directly focused on the social conditions of the hour ; in Cullen's poem, a subject common to all men of all climes and circumstances is meditated upon.

Now, to return to a specific discussion of Johnson's poetry; if there is one dominant element in his poems of "protest", it is an insistence upon a full and unqualified recognition of the

rights which are legally and morally the birthright of his race. His values, ideals and motives have been that of any other intelligent American . Throughout his writings, and his poetry is by no means the exception, he reflects the attitude that:

> On historical, psychological and cultural grounds, the Negro minority is entitled to the fullest share in American civiliza - tion, and has less real impedi - ments and separatist tendencies than any other of the many component minority elements in America. 24

There is aesthetic beauty in much of the poetry of James Weldon Johnson. In it, also, are to be found striking similarities with many of the poems of his contemporaries. The tone of Johnson's "Brothers -- American Drama" and Edwin Markham's "Man With The Hoe" is quite similar. This is by no means to infer that Johnson borrowed from the older poet; other poems show striking dissimilarities between the two.

In Johnson's poem, the victim of a mob of

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24 Locke, Alain, The Negro in America , Chicago, American Library Association, 1933, pp. 39 - 40.

lynchers is described in this realistic manner by his antagonists, who allow their inflamed hatred, prejudice and bigotry to obliterate all vestiges of decency and fair-play from within their hearts.

(The Mob Speaks;)
See! There he stands; not brave,
but with an air
Of sullen stupor. Mark him well!
Is he
Not more like brute than man? Look
in his eye!
No light is there; none save the
glint that shines
In the now glaring, and now shift-
ing orbs
Of some wild animal caught in the
hunter's trap.

How came this beast in human shape
and form?
Speak man! -- We call you man be-
cause you wear
His shape -- How are you thus? Are
you not from
That docile, child-like, tender -
hearted race
Which we have known three centuries?
Not from
That more than faithful race which
through three wars
Fed our dear wives and nursed our
helpless babes
Without a single breach of trust?
Speak out!

Johnson in his wide reading experiences had, no doubt, absorbed a mass of impressions from the masters. The language of the poem just quoted has "faint echoes" of Marlowe. Johnson's use of interrogations reminds one of the device quite

frequently employed by Shakespeare himself in some of his unforgettable classics, especially "Julius Caesar". In this scene from Johnson's "Brothers", the mob reveals its "make-up" via their own conversations. The final lines of the poem are a splendid illustration of Johnson's use of irony , which is applied in much the same manner of an Anthony decrying one point to accomplish a more subtle motive. The mob is forced to an acknowledgement that they are destroying one who has befriended them on innumerable occasions. In their fiendish outburst, they are forced to admit the kinship of one whom they regard as an "inferior" .

Just as Johnson's poem rebels against the persecution of a minority group solely because of its ethnic identity, Markham repudiates an economic system which leaves countless thousands to live,or rather exist, ina state of deplorable poverty and destitution. Just as Johnson's "brute" stands in "sullen stupor", in a state of utter bewilderment and hopeless perplexity, Markham's " monstrous thing" stands "distorted and soul-quenched". Both are the victims of social degradation; both have been crushed by relentless and compelling forces. In the case of the man to be lynched, the fact

that he is a Negro makes him despised -- while "the man with the hoe" is scorned because of the vicious social discrepancies in an untenable economic set-up based on quantitative standards of living. Each is very systematically deprived of the rights to which they are justly entitled. In either case, the dignity of labor, or the brotherhood of mankind -- a noble, humane principle is violated.

Two stanzas from Markham's poem which anteceded Johnson's will be sufficient to disclose the existing similarities in tone and theme.

> What the long reaches of the peaks
> of song,
> The rift of dawn, the reddening of
> the rose?
> Through this dread shape the
> suffering ages look;
> Time's tradegy is in that aching
> stoop;
> Through this dread shape humanity
> betrayed,
> Plundered, profaned and disinherited,
> Cries protest to the Judges of the
> World,
> A protest that is also prophecy.
>
> O masters, lords and rulers in all
> lands,
> Is this the handiwork you give to
> God,
> This monstrous thing distorted and
> soul-quenched?

How will you ever straighten up
this shape;
Touch it again with immortality;
Give back the upward looking and
the light;
Rebuild in it the music and the
dream;
Make right the immemorial infamies,
Perfidious wrongs, immedicable woes?

In justice to Johnson, it must be herein stated that some of his best poems reflect a technical skill, a creative excellence and a freshness of theme seldom encountered in the Negro poets prior to him. Many of his best poems transcend the purely racial theme. Richard W. Gilder, the editor of Century saw fit to publish his poem: "My City" which expresses his love for Manhattan with her teeming millions and multi-colored settings. The lines conclude:

But, ah! Manhattan's sights and
sounds, her smells,
Her crowds, her throbbing force, the
thrill that comes
From being of her a part, her subtile
spells,
Her shining towers, her avenues, her
slums --
O God! the stark, unutterable pity,
To be dead, and never again behold
my city.

Because of the fact that James Weldon Johnson, Countee Cullen, William Stanley Braithwaite, Jean Toomer and Claude McKay have had the courage and

breadth of vision to forsake purely racial themes in their poetry, other writers, as the critic quoted below, have looked upon their efforts to create a "kinless verse" with contempt.

> Most of the Negro poets who from nearly the beginning of the century to the middle years of the World War turned their talents toward traditional poetic material--love, birth, death, beauty, grief, gladness -- without any thought of their racial background developed a sort of dilletantism, a kind of love of display of poetic skill, and experience, and knowledge . In this their verse is comparable to the tricky poetics of the Cava - liers. It is bright and light, but without substance --Chinese fire-works. 25

Pressing his point a bit farther and getting ever closer to purely subjective criticism , the "distinguished" professor adds:

> Now this is pretty and skillful poetry, but it is not poetry afire with the compelling necessity for expression.No passion (even slightly remembered in tranquility) of pain or joy, no spring of pure personal knowledge or conviction justifies it. It is just "lines expressing something or other". 26

No additional denunciation of this criticism

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25 Redding, J. Saunders, To Make A Poet Black , Chapel Hill, The University of North Carolina Press, 1939, p. 90.
26 Ibid., p. 91.

is necessary. However, since this is by no means an "exceptional" attitude on the part of many "pseudo-critics" : that the Negro writer should confine himself mainly to purely racial themes, it is important to accentuate the fact that great poetry transcends time and race.

> No poem can be great unless its author is sincere in telling us what he sees and feels and thinks. Above all, the poet must try to make us feel what he himself does not completely feel. 27

Judged by these time-worn standards , one inevitably arrives at the conclusion that the final estimate of a poem's intrinsic merit is dependent on its emotional and imaginative appeal for all ages and all peoples.

James Weldon Johnson was not merely a crusader for an equitable adjustment of the inter - racial problem; he was, also, sincerely interested in the obliteration of all evils which affect society at large. One of his pet hates was War. In his poem, "The Greatest of These Is War" , he presents an imaginative argument in "hell" in

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27 Hubbell, Jay B. and Beaty, John O., An Introduction to Poetry, New York, The Macmillan Co., 1936 , p. 11.

which Famine, Pestilence and War participate. This poem is undoubtedly one of the finest pieces of allegory to be found in modern English letters. His pithy description of hell's worst demon and earth's fiercest scourge is especially impressive:

> Then the red monster, War, rose
> up and spoke;
> His blood-shot eyes glared round
> him, and his thundering voice
> Echoed through the murky vaults
> of hell ...

Johnson displays in this and other poems his familiarity with the classics. Johnson had not only read Milton and Shakespeare, -- he,also, knew many of the Greek and Latin masters. He was well acquainted with Dante's Divine Comedy and Milton's Paradise Lost , two of the most elevating and cherished pieces of literature to be found in any language.

Displaying his ability to rise to a dramatic pitch, Johnson reveals the characters of Famine, Pestilence and War in successive order, in much the same manner as Milton reveals the characters of Moloch, Belial and Beelzebub in Paradise Lost .

Satan, too, agrees that War is mankind' s greatest curse:

And Satan smiled, stretched out
his hand and said:
"O War, of all the scourges of
humanity, I crown you chief."

And hell rang with the acclamation of the Fiends.

Certainly, in these lines of Johnson there is none of the sonorous music and epic greatness of a poet of Milton's prominence; neither do we, however, come across Milton's equal anywhere else in the realms of American Literature. The best poetry of Johnson can easily hold its own when compared with the best efforts of his leading contemporaries: Millay, Frost, Untermeyer, Tesdale, Masters or Santayana.

Indeed, Johnson's poems in literary English deserve a much more cordial reception than they receive on many literary fronts. This criticism is not guaged from an individual viewpoint, but from a collective standpoint.

Years of travel and adventure in other lands helped to round out Johnson's personality. While he displays a knowledge of "bohemian life", most of his own personal experiences took place among the upper classes of society. This variegated contact gives a definite "cosmopolitan tang" to many

of his best poems. Johnson again uses a conven - tional rhyme scheme, but introduces a fairly "original" subject in his impressionistic view of Paris as a worldly-wise woman in "If I Were Paris" --

> Not for me the budding girl
> Or the maiden in full bloom,
> Sure of the beauty and of the
> charm,
> Careless of the distant doom,
> Laughing in the face of years
> That stretch out so long and far,
> Mindful of the things to be,
> Heedless of the things that are;
>
> But the woman sweetly ripe
> Under the autumn of her skies;
> Thin lines of care about her
> mouth,
> And utterless longings in her eyes.

This poem shows that Johnson's skill was adaptable to a wide variety of moods, as it is a flexible type of genius from which it emerges. He is adept at descriptive figures of speech; some- times he conveys a pregnant meaning in a few compact phrases. It is in narrative-descriptive poems of the type which appear in <u>God' s Trombones</u> that one can get a glimpse of John- son at his best. These seven Negro sermons are unmistakably one of America's outstanding liter- ary products.

> Although , Mr. Johnson may suggest that he is prodded by memories in the composition of these seven pieces, it is very evident that he is a distinguished and intelligent poet creating out of mist a series of curious approximations. 28

One of America's outstandingly capable critics has the following comment to make regarding one of the moving sermons included in God's Trombones.

> One is delighted to discover not only the humor but the stern pathos which is characteristic of the Negro as a singer. "The Creation", for example, is as large in conception as it is appealing in naivete. The very childlike wonder of the stirring spirituals, such moving melodies as "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" and "Nobody Knows" breathe through the best of his lines. They recapture some of the magic of which , in another connection, Johnson has written ... 29

The seven Negro sermons in verse included in God's Trombones are: "Listen Lord, A Prayer" , "The Creation" , "The Prodigal Son" , "Noah Built the Ark" , "The Crucifixion" and "Let My People Go" .

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28 New York Times Book Review , Ibid. , p. 11.
29 Untermeyer, Louis, (ed.), Modern American Poetry, New York, Harcourt,Brace and Co., 1925 , p. 171.

James Weldon Johnson's primary purpose was to set down as poetry these inspirational sermons of the old-time Negro preachers to whom he had listened as a youth. Many of these same themes are still current, and like the spirituals, they occupy a cherished and significant spot in the realms of American literature. Johnson not only succeeded in gathering together this unique folk material, he assembled it into a form in which it will survive, -- more than that, he instilled them with the vigorous and moving essence of real poetry.

No less an authority than H.L. Mencken made this unqualified statement about "Go Down Death"-----" it is one of the most remarkable and moving poems of its type ever written in America."

No exposition, however clear-cut and comprehensive, can be substituted for the author's own underlying motive in creating these sermons which have virtually arisen to a point wherein they are generally regarded as "classics" of American poetry.

> The old-time Negro preacher of parts was above all an orator, and in good measure an actor. He knew the secret of oratory, that

> at bottom it is a progression of rhythmic words more than it is anything else. Indeed, I have witnessed congregations moved to ecstasy by the rhythmic intoning of sheer incoherences. He was a master of all the modes of eloquence. He often possessed a voice that was marvelous as an instrument, a voice he could modulate from a sepulchral whisper to a crashing thunder clap. 30

Some of the striking eloquence, rhythmic and primitive beauty and irresistable charm of these sermons can be caught reviewing the following passage from "Noah Built The Ark" --

> And a little black spot begun to spread,
> Like a bottle of ink spilling over the sky;
> And the thunder rolled like a rainbow drum
> And the lightning flashed and jumped from pole to pole ...

Similarly, the same enchanting and somewhat frenzied rhythm is felt in these lines from "The Prodigal Son" --

> Young man --
> Young man --
> You're never lonesome in Babylon.
> You can always join a crowd in Babylon.
> Young man --
> Young man --

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30 Johnson, James Weldon, God's Trombones, New York, The Viking Press, 1941, p. 5.

You can never be alone in Babylon,
Alone with your Jesus in Babylon.
You can never find a place , a
lonesome place,
A lonesome place to go down on
your knees,
And talk with your God, in Babylon.
You're always in a crowd in
Babylon. [31]

In conclusion, Johnson's poems in literary English took three main directions; the most notable ones were confined to a reincarnation in verse of the primitive splendor of the old-time Negro folk-sermons; the others were either poems of "race" , or poems devoid of racial themes like "If I Were Paris". In all of these, Johnson exemplifies a technical skill, a depth of originality and an emotional intensity which entitles him to be ranked among America's leading poets (the term "Negro poet" is not applied, because in the strict sense of the word, there are no race poets). Race, color and creed can never take precedence over the realms of poetry. They are incidental, and accidental attributes; a real poet irrespective of his ethnic ties possesses a spiritual sensitivity, an imaginative genius and an appre -

31 Some critics regard these folk-sermons as being a modified form of dialect.

ciation of beauty that cannot be regimented by mere race. Poetry implies, first and foremost, originality and spontaneity of expression to an intensified type of language designed to awaken the nobler impulses of the reader.

The concluding chapter contains a final estimate of Johnson's contribution to American letters. Johnson's fame, however, does not rest upon the basis of this criticism; his fame is fortunately much more secure.

At its best, this final survey, in the subsequent chapter, will aim at arriving at a general estimate of James Weldon Johnson's place in American letters. No objective critic can fail to admit that it will take the long-range perspective of years hence to place a final estimate on the magnitude of his poetic accomplishments.

Furthermore, the writer of this thesis is fully aware of the utter impossibility of stating in scientific terms the strength of any poet's work. The homage, the appreciation, the research and recognition of future genera - tions will inevitably serve to test Johnson's

poetry. After all there is no "forge" like the Forge of Time.

Right now, with the limited means at our disposal, with the techniques at hand, we can at least surmise that Johnson's ride on the "winged horse of Pegasus" seems destined to continue uncontested for many decades to come.

Summary and Conclusion

It is exceedingly difficult to place a final estimate on a man's achievements. In the case of James Weldon Johnson, an added difficulty is encountered by virtue of the fact that the author of God's Trombones was a man of diversified talents.

Criticism at best is not an easy task; to be a great critic requires a sensitive, scholarly personality capable of catching and interpreting the delicate shadings, the fine points, the over-tones found, half-concealed, half-transparent in a true poet's writings. There is much precarious ground to be tread on by the critic, who is desirous of perfecting his thesis to the point wherein it is intelligible and objective. To accomplish this task requires time, concentration and a filtering of all available channels of information that will serve as data for the study being pursued.

If criticism in general is an heroic task; then the criticism of poetry is doubly heroic. It is tedious in the sense that poetry is a fragile, elusive, "intangible something". It is one thing to "look at" a poem; it is an entirely different thing

to understand the thought and recreate the emotion that the poet seeks to express. One who caught the true meaning of poetry, the now famous Per - cy Bysshe Shelley once remarked:

> Poetry turns all things to loveliness; it exalts the beauty of that which is most beautiful, and it adds beauty to that which is most deformed; it marries exultation and horror, grief and pleasure, eternity and change ; it subdues to union under its light all irreconciliable things.

The task confronting the critic, particularly one whose capacity and training is definitely restricted (as in this specific instance), becomes even more prodigious when the man whose poetry is being "critically analyzed" was , also, a critic of far greater repute.

Two inevitable temptations beset the inexperienced and immature critic. In either cas, he is apt to allow his personal emotions and prejudices color his thinking processes and thwart his better judgement. In most cases, the critic is either too liberal or too severe. In the first instance,he is inclined to "laud" to the "seventh heaven" the achievements of the poet whose poetry serves as a basis for the study; in the opposite case, which

is a direct antithesis of the former, and even more disastrous from an artistic viewpoint, he is inclined to magnify to too great proportions the defects and shortcomings of the "hapless" poet being studied.

This, however, is by no means meant to imply that judicious criticism is such a "herculean"task that it is foolhardy to attempt it. A few general guide-posts have been flexibly , not rigidly adhered to. No stereotyped procedures were enacted in effecting this study in poetic criticism, -- for when this is done an otherwise fruitful study is reduced to the abortive plight wherein scientific measurements supplant an imaginative recreation of the poet's mood and motive. As one critic has so clearly put it:

> Not a few are repelled from poetry because it is taught mechanically. It is a mistake to analyze too many poems too carefully, to stress metrics and literary origins... Stress instead poetry as a thing of beauty, a revelation of the aspiring human soul. 32

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32 See p. iv of his "Preface" to Recent Poetry from America, England, Ireland and Canada , Atlanta, D.C. Heath and Co., 1926.

James Weldon Johnson, first and foremost, is representative of the New Negro, who possesses a cultural background, a decided social consciousness, together with a better than average degree of intelligence, refinement and ambition. Added to the fact that Johnson distinguished himself as a writer is the fact that he, also, distinguished himself as a diplomat, educator, critic and spokesman for his race.

His faith in the literary destiny of the American Negro was never uncertain. In the excellent and clear-cut Introduction to Sterling Brown's Southern Road , Johnson summarizes the new trends in poetry:

> The record of the Negro's efforts in literature goes a long way (back to the past), covering a period of more than a century and a half, but it is only within the past ten years that America as a whole has been made consciously aware of the Negro as a literary artist. It is only within that brief time that Negro writers have ceased to be regarded as isolate cases of exceptional, perhaps accidental ability, and have gained group recognition. It is only within these few years that the arbiters of American letters have begun to assay the work of these writers by the general literary standards and accord it such appraisal as it might merit.

From the viewpoint of literary emergence, the Negro poets of this "Black Renaissance" can be grouped in this order: Claude McKay, Jean Toomer, Countee Cullen, Langston Hughes and Sterling Brown. Sterling Brown and Langston Hughes, like James Weldon Johnson, have "experimented" with Negro folk-themes and reproduced them in an original vein. These poets were, in turn, preceded by such literary notables as W.E.B. DuBois, William Stanley Braithwaite and James Weldon Johnson; American letters is richer because of the fact that each of these writers was highly individualistic. While they were all of the same contemporary background, each expressed himself in a different vein, just as Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Shelley, Scott and Keats were all members of the "school of English Romanticism" , but at the same time an individual poet with his own personal viewpoint. After all, it is through differences of opinion that art can flourish; there are no two critics who get the exact reaction to the same point of view expressed by another critic, or to the same poem. If this were so, then poetry would become an exact science; this would destroy the element of individuality.

Undoubtedly, poems are harder to criticize than prose, because of the fact that the language is less concrete and less factual.

Of the latter trio of poets , only William Braithwaite is still alive. However, Dubois will always live in American letters for his Dark Water, The Souls of Black Folk , and his auto-biography: Dusk of Dawn .

As to James Weldon Johnson, his influence is being visibly felt in many quarters; many of the younger poets of both races display in their poems an identity of mood or technique with Fisk University's sage and critic. Particularly is the similarity noticeable in the poetry of Sterling Brown of Howard University. Just as Johnson sought to perpetuate the Negro sermons in verse; Brown has taken "blues" elements from traditional work and folk songs and reproduced these in modified dialect. At the same time, Brown, like Johnson , has also done creditable poetry in literary English.

However, Sterling Brown excels most in the poems which are based on the folk-life of Afra-America. Johnson's influence is apparent in

such rhythmical lines as these taken from Brown's "The Strong Men" , which was partly inspired by Carl Sandburg's lines: "the strong men keep on coming along."

> They cooped you in their kitchens,
> They penned you in their factories,
> They gave you the jobs that they
> were too good for,
> They tried to guarantee happiness
> to themselves
> By shunting dirt and misery
> to you.

It is not an exaggerated statement to aver that Johnson displays an uncanny knowledge of American folk-lore. This ability to interpret folk patterns enabled him to show equal dexterity and adroitness in "rhyme, rhythm and ragtime" , it is not like Vachal Lindsey's, a borrowed and alien type of expression, it is as native to Johnson as the "grass-roots" of a highland region , suitable for grazing.

Without being intimately acquainted with Johnson's life , one can get pleasure and satisfaction from his poetry; however, the critic, who has made a study of the impulses and influences which gave momentum to his poetic urges,can better realize how, in his latter days,he wrote prose almost exclusively. One can at least find a plausible explanation

for the "subdued agnosticism" which colored the complexion of his writings. It is not strange to discover many poets developing a sort of "ironic veneer" during their unimaginative years. Again, this is not a statement which was necessarily capable of application in Johnson's case; one conjecture, however, is as good as another, as long as it can boast of some logical foundation.

Without being familiar with Johnson's biography it would, indeed, be futile to assay to gauge his place in American letters. In collecting and arranging, for example, the Negro spirituals in two scholarly volumes, with his brother Rosamond's assistance, he alone accomplished a literary feat of inestimable excellence. It is these folk-songs and folk-tales, coupled with the American skyscrapers, which are America's most original contribution to world civilization.

One whose soul is attuned to beauty cannot help but note --

> ...the biblical beauty of language which links them (Seven Negro Sermons in God's Trombones) with the spirituals, the richness

and homeliness, their imaginative sweep. 33

Some of this primitive splendor, elementary fervor, spontaneous simplicity, melodious phras - ing and extreme emotional depth can be discerned in such characteristic passages as those which follow from "The Creation", which is probably the most cherished and most frequently quoted sermon from God's Trombones :

Then God smiled,
And the light broke,
And the darkness rolled up on
one side,
And the light stood shining on
the other,
And God said, "That's good."

Nowhere, except , perhaps, in Green Pastures, is there to be detected the subdued restraint and the emotional intensity of these sermons in verse.

While volumes could be probably written on Johnson's personal philosophy of race relations and his spiritual leanings (or lack of such), it is better form, at any rate, to allow Johnson to speak for himself. James Weldon Johnson must be considered with such notable figures as Walter

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33 Green, Elizabeth Lay, The Negro in Contemporary American Literature , Chapel Hill, The University of North Carolina Press, 1928, p. 15.

White, Kelly Miller, Robert Moton, Charles S.Johnson, Monroe Work and William Pickens , when a list of outstanding Negroes for the century is completed. Johnson's name will also appear on any acceptable list of outstanding Americans of the last decade. As an artist, who sought to interpret the "soul of his people", he must be ranked as one of the outstanding poets of contemporary America, perhaps of all time.

Even in his prose, there is less vitriolic denunciation of the evils of oppression as one would ordinarily expect to emanate from the skillful pen of the author of An Auto-biography of An Ex-Colored Man . In this momentous volume, one runs across these restrained lines which lack the vehemence of a Claude McKay sounding his gospel in: "If We Must Die" --

> ... we should shudder with horror at the mere idea of such practises (i.e. the lynching of defenseless Negroes by passion-driven mobs) being realities in this day of enlightened and humanitarianized thought. The Southern whites are not yet living quite in the present age;many of their general ideas hark back to a former century,some of them to the Dark Ages. In the light of other days they are sometimes magnificent. Today they are cruel and ludicrous.

Call this propaganda, if you will, but one is forced to admit that many of the world's finest literary treasures contain traces of propaganda. This list, in America, must include the writings of Franklin, Otis, Paine, Jefferson, and a host of other lesser lights of past decades. It must include such recent literary personages as Steinbeck, Hemingway, Tarkington, Wright and O'Neill. It would not be difficult for the scholar, who so desired, to point out traces of "propaganda" in Whitman, Markham, Sandburg,Poe, Lincoln. Remarque and Maugham. Depending on oneself , it could readily be imagined that Milton's Paradise Lost and the Holy Bible were, also, literary implements of propaganda. This would be, naturally , circumscribing our cultural heritage within very narrow and inauspicious limits, indeed.

The rules and formulae of mathematics and chemistry cannot be satisfactorily applied to such an "ethereal" art as poetry.

No study of Johnson's life or poetry should omit some brief mention, even without comment, on his religious viewpoints, or the absence of such.

This is important because it gives us another "clue" to his personality as a man, which does not mean that his religious convictions necessarily colored his poetry. Since Johnson concentrated so much of his energy on Negro sermons in verse the immature critic might be led to deduce that Johnson was a man of "deep, unshakable faith". It is interesting to repeat Johnson's own ideas in the matter:

> My glance forward reaches no farther than this world ... I do not know if there is a personal God; I do not see how I can know; and I do not see how my knowing can matter. What does matter, I believe, is how I deal with myself and how I deal with my fellows. I feel that I can practise a conduct towards my fellows that will constitute the basis for an adequate religion , a religion that may comprehend spirituality and beauty and serene happiness. 34

From this statement, the critic who is used to looking for "secret motives" will invariably jump to the conclusion that Johnson was an agnostic. He will resort to the following literary "hokus-pokus"--he will nickname Shelley an atheist, Wordsworth a nature poet, Milton a Puritan and Tho-

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34 Johnson, James Weldon, Along This Way , New York, The Viking Press, 1940, p. 413.

reau a trancendentalist. He memorizes a few unrelated biographical facts concerning an author and from these he professes to be competent enough to interpret the poet's compositions. Such a state of affairs is incongrous to say the least.

Like Emerson, Johnson must be thought of as one of the great "individualistic" thinkers of our literature. Johnson was very far from being part and parcel of any particular school of thought in race, poetry or religion.

Naturally, since the compiler of this thesis has no "ax to grind" or "points" to prove, it is not necessary to apologize, or eulogize the fact that Johnson, during his later years, revealed traces of dis-belief. One must remember that he never attempted to influence others along theolo - gical lines; it remained a personal code within the man himself.

Obviously, one with any depth of vision can understand the tremendous perplexities and complexities encountered by a sensitive , individualistic thinker of Johnson's type.

Now let us return, after this rather lengthy excursion, to a consideration of Johnson's poetry.

It is decidedly preferable to dwell on Johnson's artistic compositions, for poets like this distinguished American have gone a long way toward bringing to realization the prophecy voiced by one of the generation's most far-visioned critics:

> Man has partly conquered the general need of food by increasingly providing it for all. This will be accomplished: utter poverty will be wiped out.
>
> The mechanical age will flourish on, with more and more acceptance from the singers.
>
> Oppressions like capitalism and race prejudice will end ... in the not so far distant future, the oppressed, the sensitives --- poets and others -- and the followers of accepted moral codes will end the evil of oppression.
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A very revealing idea of Johnson's estimate of the "so-called race problem", which permeates much of his poetry can be gained from a study of some of his own volumes. In the essay below, Johnson, in true scholarly fashion, has done much to attack the discrepancies which exist in the education and employment of Negroes when compared with similar channels of expression enjoyed by the

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35 Wood, Clement, Hunters of Heaven, The American Soul as Revealed by Its Poetry, New York, Frederick A. Stokes Co., 1929, p. 349.

exhibit his Wordsworthian elements. The following lines from "O Southland" contain some of the sonorous diction, sincere emotion and elevated theme which typify the older and greater poet --

O Southland! my Southland!
O birthland, do not shirk
The toilsome task, nor respite
ask,
But gird you for the work.
Remember, remember
That weakness stalks in pride;
That he is strong that helps
along
The faint one at his side.

The final two lines remind one of Lowell's;

Cowards they, who dare
not speak
For the fallen and the
weak ...

Another line, or lines noted by no less an authority than Brander Matthews, conveying the same depth of emotion and displaying the same degree of craftsmanship, follows:

(The lines are from Johnson's "The Y oung Warrior".)

Pray, mother of mine, that I
always keep
My heart and purpose strong,
My sword unsullied and ready
to leap
Unsheathed against the wrong.

The lines "mother of mine" remind one of Kipling ; however, these lines were not originally used by Kipling or Johnson.

Johnson's place in American literature is indeed solid, stable and secure, not only in poetry but also in prose.

In perusing the poetry of Johnson, in the preparation of this thesis, the author has come across a versatile range of subject matter and a style that was adaptable to classical, as well as, the more recent poetic patterns. The appraisal of Johnson's poetry has been based on an objective criticism of the thought he wishes to convey and his method of imparting it. Johnson does not encounter great difficulty either in expressing himself or in allowing the reader to grasp his meaning. One must seek elsewhere for obsequious styles, or hidden meanings. Johnson's poetry, fortunately for the masses , is easy to read and simple to comprehend.

It is a simple, eloquent type of poetry; not a lavish, grotesque form of art. It can be very readily read for the pure pleasure and enjoyment it affords. This interpolation is by no means intended to associate Johnson with the " Cavaliers" - much of what he has written is thought-provoking in its imagery and tone.

The writer of this thesis has tried to keep

before himself this unalterable detail of criti - cism:

> Negro literature demands no unique method of approach, no special interpretation of the rules of craftsmanship , because the standards of literary fame are based on universal principles. 37

Judged by universal standards of criticism, the poetry of James Weldon Johnson will in all likelihood survive the test of time. The subsequent lines from Johnson's "O Black and Unknown Bards " might well be broadened to include the "unknown celebrities" of any race or nationality. Whereas, it is definitely true that James Weldon Johnson had the unsung Negro creators of the spirituals in mind, it is, also, beyond contradiction, that deep within the confines of genuine art there are "connecting links". Art can never be confined to a purely racial amphitheatere. These smoothly flowing lines from the aforementioned poem contain traces of the excellent and careful craftsmanship which typified Tennyson, Thackery and Longfellow:

O Black and unknown bards of long ago,

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37 See the "Preface" to Readings from Negro Au - thors, edited by Otelia Cromwell, Lorenzo Dow Turner and Eva B. Dykes, New York, Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1931, p.1.

How came your lips to touch the
sacred fire?
How in your darkness, did you
come to know
The power and beauty of the min-
strel's lyre?
Who first from midst his bonds
lifted his eyes?
Who first from out the still
watch, lone and long,
Feeling the ancient faith of
prophets rise
Within his dark-kept soul,
burst into song?

The poetic use of the interrogative, of alliterative passages and suspended emotion in this poem is characteristic of Johnson as a poet. While he is inspired to memorialize in verse the achievements of these "unsung bards", the poem itself contains a quality of universality that should not pass unnoted. Johnson must be judged as a poet, not as a propagandist; he must be criticized as an artist not as a race advocate. Just as Whitman is looked upon as being the "disciple of democracy" and Carl Sandburg is regarded as the"poet of Industrial America". Sometimes critics, in haste, only remember Johnson's work with folk-material. His contribution was much wider than that. One pointed observation regarding the place of the Negro poet in America follows:

It is not at all advanced that

> the contemporary poetry of the American Negro is to be ranked with the best of modern poetry..What it means to be a Negro in the modern world is a revelation much needed in poetry. 38

Surely, as the years roll on, the place occupied by James Weldon Johnson in American literature will become increasingly established. No poet of America had a greater devotion for the quaint old melodies, which saw their origins in the shadows of the South amidst the obscurity of slavery. One can see how such timeless pieces as the one which follows would exert considerable influence on Johnson's style and subject matter --

> We read in the Bible an' we
> understan'
> Methuselah was the oldes' man,
> He lived nine hundred and ninty-
> nine
> He died an' went to heaven, Lord
> in-a due time.

Just as James Weldon Johnson took the Negro folk sermons and arranged them into a piece of deathless literature in God's Trombones, Langston Hughes was later to take the "ragtime" aspects of these early folk-songs and have them serve as

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38 Brown, Sterling, Negro Poetry and Drama, Washington, D.C., The Associates in Negro Folk Education. 1937, p. 80.

source material for his rhythmic compositions such as those found in his ever popular: Weary Blues.

Here is an interesting comment regarding the spirituals with which Johnson was thoroughly ac - quainted:

> With all the works of beautiful Christmas carols, the creations of those illiterate but inspired men must take place in front rank Con - sider the simple beauty, the tender- ness, and the adoration of this open- ing line of "Glory to That New- Born King", "O Mary, what you goin' to name that pretty little baby?" Con - sider the majesty of that paean, "Wasn't that a mighty day when Jesus Christ was born!" 39

In Johnson's "The Judgement Day", he exhibits the same simple faith and plaintive restraint as the originators of the spirituals exemplified:

> In that great day,
> People, in that great day,
> God's a-going to rain down fire.
> God's a-going to sit in the middle
> of the air
> To judge the quick and the dead.

It is entirely plausible that such expressions as the "middle of the air" might have been wholly unconsciously motivated by such lines as these:

> Ezekiel saw de wheel,

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39 Work, John W., (ed.), American Negro Songs , Howell, Soskin and Co., New York, 1940, p. 25.

Way up in de middle ob de air --
De big wheel run by faith,
An' de little wheel run by de
grace ob God,
Way up in de middle ob de air.

Louis Untermeyer, the celebrated poet and critic, sees fit to honor Johnson with a place in his anthology. 40 Johnson occupies a place alongside such distinguished contemporaries and past poets (deceased) as: Emily Dickinson, Joaquin Miller, Bliss Carman, Sidney Lanier, James Whitcomb Riley, Eugene Field, Edwin Markham, Amy Lowell, Louis Guiney and others. The other Negro poets included in this well-known anthology are: Paul Lawrence Dunbar, Claude McKay and Countee Cullen.

One of Russia's famous literary notables, who undoubtedly, like Johnson, knew the true nature of art once wrote:

> To evoke in oneself a feeling one has once experienced and having evoked it in oneself then by means of movements, lines , colors, sounds, or forms expressed in words, so to transmit that feeling that others experience the same feeling --- that is the activity of art.
>
> Art is a human activity consisting in this, that one man consciously by means of certain external signs, hands on to others feelings he has lived through,and

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40 Untermeyer. Op. cit., pp. 171 - 175.

that others are infected by these
feelings and also experiences them. [41]

There are definite facts to substantiate the opinion that many of Johnson's poems are real artistic productions. Johnson's "St. Peter Relates An Incident" is a satiric gem. Particularly effective are the lines which describe the consternation of the mob upon their discovery that the "unknown soldier" is, as they crudely and brusquely put it: "a nigger" .

They discover upon "Ressurection Day" that for countless centuries they have been paying tribute and homage to a despised American. When they finally complete their digging, imagine their surprise:

He, underneath the debris, heaved
and hove
Up toward the opening which they
cleaved and clove;
Through it, at last, his towering
form loomed big and bigger --
"Great God Almighty! Look!"
they cried, " he is a nigger!"

In conclusion, the poetry of James Weldon Johnson, alone, is a silent repudiation of such preju - dicial and unconditioned statements as the one be-

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41 Tolstoy, Count Leo Nikolayevich, "What is Art?", Chapter IV, in The Art of Literary Criticism edited by Robert Lieder and Robert Withington, New York, D. Appleton-Century Co., 1941, p. 631.

low which reeks with falsity:

> Whatever answer may be offered, the fact remains that few Negro Americans have been true makers of literature. 42

James Weldon Johnson's poetry was a decided step forward. It was an improvement over that of his forerunner, Paul Lawrence Dunbar, not that the contribution of the latter poet can be ignored.

> Much of Dunbar's poetry in literary English consisted of romantic echoes, rehearsing the stereotypes and cliches of his predecessors and contemporaries ... 43

This same critic , however, goes on to point out the finer aspects of Dunbar's poetry which definitely inspired later Negro writers to abandon the use of straight dialect.

It is not a whimsical notion to rank James Weldon Johnson in the front ranks of American literary representatives. Certainly, the work of Johnson, Dunbar, Cullen, Hughes, McKay and Braithwaite is worthy of comparison with the best pro -

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42 Nelson, John Herbert, The Negro Character in American Literature, Humanistic Series, Vol. IV , Lawrence, Department of Journalism Press, 1926,p. 134.

43 Lawson, Victor, Dunbar Critically Examined , Washington, The Associated Publishers, 1941, p.47.

duced by that of their contemporaries.

Johnson's own prophecy seems to be reaching a point of crystallization:

> Much ground has been covered, but more will yet be covered ... the undeniable creative genius of the Negro is destined to make a distinctive contribution to American poetry. 44

Johnson's fame will live through the centuries yet unborn. Who is there who can show cause whereby Johnson is not entitled to a prominent place in American letters ? His work in compiling the Negro spirituals and in composing God's Trombones is a sizeable accomplishment in itself.

Likewise, who is there who can reach out into the dim outlines of the future and tell what poets will survive the "onslaughts" of time?

Perhaps, the very last thoughts which rushed through his brain before his fatal demise in an automobile crash were similar to the

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44 Johnson, James Weldon, The Book of American Negro Poetry , New York, Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1931, p. 47.

thoughts voiced by the "sinner" in one of his own compositions, "Listen Lord" , when he made this appeal --

> And now, O Lord --
> When I've done drunk my last cup
> of sorrow --
> When I've been called everything
> but a child of God --
> When I'm done travelling up the
> rough side of the mountain --
> O -- Mary's Baby --
> When I start down the steep and
> slippery steps of death --
> When this old world begins to rock
> beneath my feet --
> Lower me to my dusty grave
> in peace
> To wait for that great gittin' up
> morning --
> Amen.

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